DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 555 FL 801 283

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TITLE	Using the World Wide Web with Adult ESL Learners. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.; Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-LE-98-05
PUB DATE	1998-12-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM	NCLE, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016; Tel: 202-362-0700, ext. 200; e-mail: ncle@cal.org; Web site: http://www.cal.org/ncle
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Adult Students; Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Lesson Plans; Literacy Education; Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; *World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest presents reasons for using World Wide Web activities in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. It addresses the issue of preparing learners to use the Web and suggests activities that focus on authentic learning experiences to enhance skills. Discussion is centered in skills developed through the World Wide Web, preparing learners for searching the World Wide Web, a procedure for a Web-based ESL lesson, and a sample lesson: 'Monitoring the Weather.' (Contains 8 references.) (Author/JL)

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ERIC Digest

December 1998
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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

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Developed for the military and adopted by universities as a medium for research, the Internet – a network that links computers all over the world – is now used widely by businesses, educators, government staff, and individuals for information gathering, entertainment, commerce, and communication. Much has been written about the use of Internet technologies such as e-mail, listservs, bulletin boards, and newsgroups in English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language classroom (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1997; Warschauer, 1996). However, another feature of the Internet, the World Wide Web, is also an excellent source for authentic language learning experiences.

This digest presents reasons for using World Wide Web activities in adult ESL instruction, addresses the issue of preparing learners to use the Web, and suggests activities that use authentic learning experiences to enhance skills.

Skills Developed through the World Wide Web

Websites cover a wide variety of topics and interests including health, entertainment, news, and sports. These sites provide information with which learners can interact in order to build basic language and employability skills.

Language Skills

A number of websites were created especially for English learners and contain exercises in grammar, vocabulary, writing, or reading (e.g., Lingua Center Grammar Safari <http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web.pages/grammarsafari.html>; Frizzy University Network (FUN) <http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~funweb/>; Weekly Idiom <http://www.comenius.com/idiom/index.html>; and Grammar Self Study Quizzes for ESL Students <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/quizzes/index.html>). Other ESL sites provide practice in listening (e.g., Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab <http://www.esl-lab.com>; and Dave's ESL Cafe <http://www.eslcafe.com/>).

To develop reading skills, learners employ skimming and scanning skills to find the information they need. Hyperlinked menus – where readers click on highlighted words, phrases, or images and move to another section of the page or site – facilitate the use of these skills. Web reading includes both prose literacy (narrative) and document literacy (charts and graphs). Instructors can introduce learners to sites that may be relevant to course content and personal interests. Since most English language websites are written for English speakers, the language may be more appropriate for intermediate and advanced learners. However, if instructors choose websites that include graphics and pre-teach the vocabulary, even learners with limited English can take advantage of the Web resources.

Writing is a natural response to Web reading as learners respond to articles, request further information on topics, register complaints, and provide information about themselves. Websites prompt learners to complete forms, send e-mail messages to political representatives, request information on travel destinations, and write comments for bulletin boards and guest books. Engaging in these authentic tasks make writing meaningful. The large amount of information available on the Web requires learners to synthesize what they have read as they write reports and opinion pieces and make oral presentations. Individuals can also create their own websites as a way to publish texts and projects.

Studies have shown that computers can also facilitate oral communication between learners. Learners want to talk about their research and what they are learning. One study reported that communication occurred among students when they were using computers both individually or in groups (DeVillar & Faltis, 1991). The Web also makes it possible to listen to news broadcasts, historical speeches, and films. These sound files can easily be replayed as needed for comprehension.

Employability Skills

Employability skills are the skills needed to find, get, and keep a job. The SCANS Commission (Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) names the following skills required for effective workplace performance — three foundational skills which include basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, mathematics), thinking skills (creative thinking, reasoning, decision making, problem solving, representing information, learning how to learn), and personal qualities (individual responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management), and five workplace competencies (use of resources, interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology) for solid workplace performance. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

Many of these skills are addressed in well designed Web-based lessons. For example, effective use of the Web requires skills in problem solving, as learners need strategies to sort through the flood of information. The analyzing and evaluating of information that learners must do to separate the wheat from the chaff is similar to what employees do at today's workplace as they gather information from remote sources (Dede, 1996). Projects that require learners to use the Web to gather information about specific topics (e.g., health insurance) provide practice in many SCANS workplace competencies. If learners can work in teams on these projects, they will have experience working cooperatively, solving problems as a team, and coming to a consensus. Further, using the Web in the adult ESL classroom gives learners opportunities to "develop technology skills and experiences in contexts that are similar to those in which technology is used outside the classroom" (Ginsburg, 1998, p.42). Learners become familiar with technology as they use the mouse to point and click and navigate from screen to screen. Icons that were once unfamiliar now have meaning that will transfer to a variety of computer applications. As learners type information into online forms, they improve their keyboarding skills.

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Preparing Learners for Searching the World Wide Web

Preparation can turn an overwhelming experience into a manageable one. Learners should be introduced to the use of the mouse, the browser, and the modem or Internet connection. A lesson in how to use icons and a mouse will make learners feel more comfortable as they approach the World Wide Web. If they have used computers before for word processing, they may already be familiar with many computing conventions.

One of the greatest challenges of searching the World Wide Web is finding appropriate information. A lesson on Web searching will give learners more control over the process. This lesson should include brainstorming keywords and concepts, adjusting these terms as needed, using search engines such as Yahoo, HotBot, and Alta Vista. Learners can keep logs to see which keywords yield the best results for particular searches. (See Cowles, 1997, for lesson ideas on Web searching.)

Because Web-based materials are not necessarily accurate or truthful, Web searching can also help learners develop their critical literacy skills. Learners can be taught to consider the source and question the veracity of what they read, a critical lesson in an age when tabloids and even legitimate news outlets print stories that are not completely true. Guidelines and criteria for evaluating the accuracy and quality of the information at a given website can be found at Kathy Shrock's Guide for Educators (http://discoveryschool.com/schrockguide/) and in Cowles (1997).

Finally, learners should be prepared for the possibility that, because the Web is an uncensored medium, searching it can yield unwanted results. Sites containing pornographic photographs and videos may appear. If found, these sites can stimulate class discussions about freedom of speech, whether or not children should have unlimited access to the Web, and whether public libraries and schools should allow censorship.

Procedure for a Web-based ESL lesson

Web-based activities can include electronic field trips to museums and historical sites; comparison shopping online; and finding information about health, home buying, and travel. However, as with any language teaching tool, there must be clear objectives, focused activities, and evaluation. There are three essential steps for Web-based activities:

- Prepare learners for the activity. Ask learners to define a problem and then identify possible sites or sources that may contain information that will help them to explore that problem. Be sure that learners have familiarized themselves with the use of search engines. Brainstorm keywords to be used in the search. Be sure that learners know how to use the browser and hardware (such as a CD-ROM drive) or software (such as Sound Card) that might be needed for audio or video. Establish how learners will record the information. Will they print pages, make notes, or complete a survey form? How much information will be enough?
- Perform the activity online. Locate the sources and gather the relevant information from each source.
- Process the information. Ask learners to organize the information collected from multiple sources. They may present this information in an agreed upon format. Have learners evaluate the information gathered as well as the information gathering process.

The following is an example of a Web-based lesson adapted from Bogarde (1995). Although written for K-12 learners, the lesson is also useful for adults, especially if the analysis and evaluation of both the product and the process is stressed.

Sample Lesson: Monitoring the Weather

- To prepare learners, review weather expressions (e. g., hot, cloudy, rainy). Teach or review the formula for converting Fahrenheit and Centigrade temperatures. Choose the cities that the class will monitor and locate them on the map. Decide whether to monitor the weather daily, weekly, or monthly. Ask learners to suggest some Web sources for weather or brainstorm some keywords for finding weather sites through a search engine. Decide what information will be tracked (e.g., temperature, precipitation, or other conditions). Record the information on a chart in the classroom; groups may choose to keep individual charts for different cities.
- To perform the activity online, have individuals or groups search for weather sites that contain information on the selected cities and record this information.
- To process the information, learners can organize the information they have gathered and make bar charts and graphs that illustrate the temperature or rainfall for each city. Ask learners to evaluate the various weather sites they used. Were some better than others? Why? Ask learners what part of the activity they would have changed. Was the process appropriate for their product?

Conclusion

The World Wide Web is an immense library of authentic materials for the language learning classroom. With careful planning, adult ESL instructors can use the Web in the adult classroom to help prepare learners for the workforce, to introduce them to American culture, and to help them improve their English language skills.

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